



WAUGH DRIVE BRIDGE BAT COLONY

There's something amazing going on under the Waugh Drive Bridge near Buffalo Bayou!

About 250,000 of Houston's best-kept secrets have been quietly residing within the crevices of Waugh Drive Bridge for a number of years. "The Waugh Bridge Bat Colony" consists of Mexican free-tailed bats that come forth nightly to stretch their wings and feed on area insects. HPARD has partnered with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, and enthusiastic area volunteers to begin counting and recording the activities of the Bat Colony.

Unlike other Texas bat colonies that opt for warmer climates by migrating southward during winter months, The Waugh Bridge Bat Colony remains in Houston throughout the year. As far as we know, this is the only bridge in Texas that has such a large colony of Mexican free-tailed bats that reside all year, even through the winter months. The huge majority of bats at other bridges migrate to Mexico for the winter.

Bats at the Congress Avenue Bridge Bat Colony in Austin (population 1.5 million), for example, begin migrating south to Mexico in the fall months, ending the twilight emergences until the following spring.

Bats play key roles in keeping a wide variety of insect populations in balance. In the U.S., brown bats often eat mosquitoes and can catch up to 1,200 tiny insects in an hour. Large colonies of Mexican free-tailed bats eat tons of pests weekly.

BAT VIEWING TIPS:

Houstonians are encouraged to visit the Waugh Drive Bridge Bat Colony and watch their awe-inspiring emergence. The following tips will help you have a safe, fun-filled, batty viewing:

- The bats usually venture out after dusk every night. However, the exact time varies according to a schedule known only to the bats themselves. Sometimes the bats surprise viewers and emerge before sunset or well after dark. Try to arrive about 15 - 30 minutes before the official sunset time for that evening. Have a seat and enjoy the evening while waiting for the bats to appear.
- Rainy or cold nights, may delay the bats exit. If the temperature is below 50 degrees at sunset the bats may stay home.

- The number of bats venturing out for the night varies from several hundred per minute to several thousand every night. Their appearance produces a “bat cloud” of sorts, which can vary in size from evening to evening. If the cloud is small one evening please return again on another night.
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- The summer and fall months appear to be the best times for observations. The highest bat population observations have occurred in August and September.
- The Third Friday of every month is “Family Bat Night” – Bat Team volunteers from the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, The Park People, Texas Master Naturalists, Houston Zoo, Buffalo Bayou Partnership, Bayou Preservation Association, and the public are available at the bridge on the third Friday of EVERY month to answer questions about the bats and to assist with viewings. To hear a brief presentation about the bats at Waugh Drive, please arrive 20 – 30 minutes before sunset on Third Friday evenings.
- Prior to emerging from the bridge, the bats chatter social calls to each other among the crevices. Please don’t stand beneath the bridge during this time because the bats tend to void wastes in preparation for flight. Eventually the bats begin dropping from the crevices, often forming a whirling vortex beneath the bridge. Researchers believe this vortex allows the bats to gain altitude and speed. Then the bats exit the bridge on the east side, often flying along the bayou toward Downtown.
- Wildlife predators often lurk along the eastern banks of Buffalo Bayou, waiting for the bats to emerge each evening. Visitors have observed a red-tailed hawk, Cooper’s hawk, and peregrine falcons swooping into the cloud of bats as they exit the bridge. It is all part of the predator – prey cycle of life. Once the sunsets and the light are too dark for the birds to see well, the bats are able to fly freely through the night, hunting for insects.

BEST VIEWING LOCATIONS:

The Waugh Street bats prefer to emerge from the eastern side of the bridge. The Waugh Bat Team volunteers recommend these spots for optimal bat viewing:

- 1) The southeast embankment of the bridge, corner of Waugh Drive and Allen Parkway, directly across from the American General building. Start here to watch the bats swirling beneath the bridge prior to their emergence.

2) The gently sloping, grassy northeast bayou bank, corner of Memorial Drive and Waugh Drive in Buffalo Bayou Park.

3) The Waugh Drive Bridge sidewalk, standing against the railing on the east side of the bridge, facing the Downtown Houston skyline. Please use caution and be ever mindful of the traffic, pedestrians, and bikers utilizing the bridge as well.

4) The Gus M. Wortham Memorial Fountain along Allen Parkway, east of Waugh Drive. The fountain is lovingly known by Houstonians as the “Dandelion Fountain” due to its shape and design. If you stand along the sidewalk near the bayou tree line, the bats often fly directly overhead.

PARKING:

Parking is available at Spotts Park or at designated parking areas along Allen Parkway.

BAT VIEWING ETIQUETTE:

Viewing the bat emergence can be one of the most amazing experiences in nature. Please be “bat-friendly” and enjoy watching the bats without causing harm to the bats or yourself.

- Please sit or stand several feet away from the bridge during the emergence to give the bats plenty of room to fly. Please do not stand under the bridge during the emergence.
- Bats prefer the dark, especially when first exiting from their bridge crevices. Do not use flashlights or camera flashes during the bats exodus.
- Loud voices can alter the bats’ emergence behavior. Please be considerate by keeping the noise levels down. Please supervise your children and pets while visiting the bridge.
- Please do not throw objects at flying or roosting bats. We share this bridge peacefully with the bats.
- Do not touch or pick up a grounded bat for any reason. If the bat is on the ground, it may be a young bat still learning to fly, or it may be ill. Grounded bats will bite in self-defense.

FUN FACTS ABOUT BATS

More than 1,100 bat species have been discovered worldwide. The United States is home to 47 bat species. Texas has the highest bat diversity of all the states – 31 bat species.

The largest bat in Texas is the Western mastiff bat, with a wingspan of 20.9 to 22.4 inches. The smallest Texas bat is the Western pipistrelle, with a wingspan of 7.5 to 8.5 inches. Both of those bats reside primarily in western Texas.

Greater Houston is home to 11 bat species, all insect-eaters. Those species are: Mexican free-tailed bat, big brown bat, evening bat, Eastern red bat, Northern yellow bat, Eastern pipistrelle, hoary bat, Seminole bat, Southeastern myotis, silver-haired bat, and Rafinesque's big-eared bat (state threatened species).

Bats are NOT blind! They have average vision, but have excellent senses of hearing and smell.

Bats in Houston eat insects. They find their insect prey using "echolocation," which is the use of ultra-high frequency sounds for navigation. Bats and dolphins are mammals known to use sound to see! The bat sends out a pulse of sound from its mouth. The sound bounces off an object, such as a moth, and then echoes back to the bat's ears. The bat continues to send out the sound pulses until it catches the insect. Bats use echolocation to catch prey in total darkness. Because they can sense objects in front of them so well, they don't become tangled in people's hair or land of people with specifically-colored shirts, contrary to popular myth.

The Mexican free-tailed bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) is a medium sized bat with a wingspan of 11 to 13 inches. Its life span is approximately 13 years. Mexican free-tailed bats live in large caves, bridges, buildings, tunnels, and bat houses all across Texas.

Baby Mexican free-tailed bats are known as "pups". A female bat gives birth to one pup each spring and temporarily leaves it behind when she emerges to hunt. Each mother is able to find her pup among the thousands in the colony each day by remembering the approximate location where she left her pup, and by recognizing her pup's unique voice and scent.

Mexican free-tailed bats love bugs! Bats are important for pest control since they eat insects and agricultural pests. Favorites on the bat menu are moths, ants and beetles. A Mexican free-tailed bat can eat up to two-thirds of their body weight in insects. The estimated 100 million Mexican free-tailed bats living in the Texas Hill Country could eat up to 1,000 tons of insects each night. Here in Houston, the estimated 250,000 Mexican free-tailed bats at Waugh Drive bridge could consume almost 2 ½ tons of insects each night.

The Mexican free-tailed bat is a gentle creature that will not harm visitors if left alone. However, visitors are warned against touching a bat as it may bite in self-defense. Bats, as with all mammals, can catch the rabies virus. Bat Conservation International research states that less than ½ of 1 percent

of a bat population may contract the virus. The ill bat dies quietly, unlike myths and stories about dogs and other mammals. However, for these reasons, please do not touch a grounded bat.

FUN WEBSITES FOR MORE “BATTY” INFORMATION

Bat Conservation International – www.batcon.org

The Buffalo Bayou Partnership - www.buffalobayou.org

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department – www.tpwd.state.tx.us

The Park People - <http://www.parkpeople.org>